

Tactical Exercises Ended

By Chief Warrant Officer Henry A. Long, Jr., U.S. Navy (Retired)

On Friday, 5 December 1941, the USS *Oklahoma* (BB-37) came into a Pearl Harbor crowded with 96 other ships. We moored outboard of the battleship *Maryland* (BB-46), starboard side to.

We had been conducting exercises and were proud to have done well in gunnery with our main, broadside, and antiaircraft batteries. We were battlewagon sailors.

Aft on the starboard side—just forward of the steering engine room—was a fairly large compartment that was designated radio 4. For all practical purposes, this compartment was empty but could be used as another emergency radio room if and when we acquired more equipment. We used it as a classroom. On more than one occasion Lieutenant Mann Hamm, our communications officer, and Lieutenant (junior grade) Gordon Cotchefer, our radio officer, and some of the communications watch officers would meet with us there. We would go over communications operating procedures and changes.

Sometime in November we had a larger-than-usual meeting. We radio operators were instructed to listen for the phrase "tactical exercises ended" on any circuit, whether it was on task force commander, harbor, drill, or any other. This meant we were at war.

The ships were in the harbor for the annual Military and Admiral's Inspection. The former covered the Army and Army Air Corps; the latter involved all of the Navy. By the time we arrived in port, most of the ships had been inspected for military readiness. Because we were late in coming in, we were not scheduled to be inspected until Monday, 8 December.

My ship was ready. She had been cleaned from stem to stern and keel to truck. All ammunition had been returned to the magazines. Our gun components had been disassembled for inspection to show there were no rusty or worn parts.

The voids and lower compartments were cleaned and left open. Normally, these areas are closed for watertight integrity, and the divisions responsible for these areas would send someone to the engineering office to report that their areas were secure. Because it was quite a task to bolt all the inspection plates in the voids and to close all the watertight doors and hatches in the lower compartments, the captain decided to leave everything open in readiness for the inspection on Monday.

I rated liberty on Saturday. While on shore, I purchased a pair of tan shoes at Sears' new air-conditioned store in Honolulu. I had decided to wear "civvies" while on liberty and had already received from home several pairs of slacks—one a favorite Bedford cord—and some sport shirts.

On the morning of 7 December, I was outside the main radio shack polishing my new shoes, using the conveyor as a workbench. Suddenly I heard, "All hands man your battle stations" over the ship's announcing system. But this was Sunday and we were in port. Nobody moved.



A warhead slams home into the USS *Oklahoma*'s thick skin, rattling the battleship's rigging and knocking men off their feet.

The announcement came again, this time with great urgency. "All hands man your battle stations! This is the real thing! No shit!" Everybody moved!

The shoes forgotten, I ran aft on the port side to the next compartment and across to the starboard side and down through a hatch opening into the transmitter room below the armor deck, which was six or eight inches of

solid steel. This was four decks below the main deck and well below the waterline.

Our talker on the sound-powered phones was Seaman First Class Eugene Wicker. He established communications with main radio, emergency radio 3 (which was on the port side), and radio 4. (Radio 3 had been my battle station until about a month before, when the battle bill was changed. For some reason, unknown to this day, my friend Bruce Ellison, who had been in transmitters, and I were swapped.)

The ship was suddenly shaken by several severe jolts that felt to me like our main battery guns (our 14-inch rifles) were being fired. I thought this was silly. Why would we be firing these big guns in port?

When the raid came, the message broadcast was "Air raid. Pearl Harbor. This is no drill." In my opinion this caused confusion among those ships and activities not in the immediate area. This is probably why the carrier *Enterprise* (CV-6) sent some of her planes in that evening to land at the naval air station at Ford Island, in Pearl Harbor. This was not the prearranged signal, and people couldn't believe that Pearl Harbor had actually been attacked.

I started thinking about our position. If these severe jolts were bombs, we were below the armor deck and should be protected. If they were torpedoes going into the port side, we were on the opposite side next to the battleship *Maryland* and also protected.

Wicker announced he had lost communication with emergency radio 3, and shortly thereafter, with radio central. About this time, our transmitters—which were about six feet tall and bolted to the steel deck—started creaking. Then our chairs fell over. Radioman Second Class Frank Spencer tried to right them, only to have them fall over again. I told him to forget it.

I became quite concerned, realizing the seriousness of our situation. I had slipped into my shoes without tying them. I put my foot up onto one of the chairs to tie my shoe and found to my great surprise that my leg and foot were quite visibly shaking.

Not long after we were torpedoed, we lost power and were unable to operate the hoists to get ammunition topside. I heard afterwards that there was some ammunition in the crew's reception room, but it was locked and no one could locate the key.

The captain's decision to leave the voids open for inspection was a fatal error: there was no watertight integrity. For some reason the damage-control party was unable to flood the starboard side to trim ship. As a result, the *Oklahoma* filled with water on the port side and rolled over.

The loudspeaker in our transmitter room hadn't been working very well, so I put my ear close to hear if the word had been passed to abandon ship. I thought I heard it and asked Spencer to open the hatch to find out. He did and immediately reported, "Everyone is leaving." He opened the hatch wide and we started up a series of ladders on the way to the main deck.

There was quite a crush of bodies ascending and a struggle to get on the first ladder. Seaman First Class Roy

Inlow took one look and decided I would have difficulty getting on the ladders. Roy was quite husky. He said, "Come on, Long" and tucked me in behind him like he was running interference for a ball carrier. We managed to get up to the main deck in S division on the starboard side just forward of the doorway to the quarterdeck and the main deck aft. It was crushingly crowded.

I lost track of Inlow. I looked around and saw the men were jammed together all the way forward into officers' country. Then I noticed there was an officer, Ensign John Davenport—who was the junior officer of the deck—standing in the doorway with his messenger. He wouldn't let us out onto the main deck aft.

By this time the ship had heeled over about 45 degrees to port. It was so crowded Ensign Davenport ordered those of us nearest to the door to go below. Wicker did. I never saw him again. I remained by the door.

Ensign Davenport explained that he wouldn't let us out because "they" were strafing and we were safer where we were. I didn't have a very wide view from where I was standing, but I didn't see any strafing. I was standing next to him and questioned our position. He announced that the ship had touched the bottom of the harbor on the low side. He apparently forgot we were outboard of the *Maryland* and in the channel. The ship remained stationary for a little while.

I had always lived on the water and had raced speedboats and sailboats since I was in the seventh grade. I had capsized sailboats and knew when we had reached the point of no return. The ship suddenly accelerated her roll. I had lined up our plane recovery crane on the fantail with some trees at Aiea to gauge our movement. The barbettes were going under water. I had turned to look at all the men behind me, but when I turned again to the doorway, I discovered Ensign Davenport and his messenger had left without saying a word. I must not have been very far behind them. I saw no one else leave behind me.

My intention when I got out onto the main deck aft, which by this time was at a very steep angle, was not to get my feet wet. I planned to "walk the ship around" as I had done when my sailboat had capsized. By this time the ship was rolling so fast that I climbed over a three-inch antiaircraft gun on the quarterdeck in my haste because I didn't have time to go around it. I don't know to this day how I managed to do that.

By this time the lifelines were upside down and the ship's side was too steep to stand on the bottom. I saw that one of the mooring lines a short distance aft of me was draped over the ship's hull, and I thought I could run along the inverted lifeline and, with the aid of the mooring line, climb to the ship's bottom. The ship rolled too fast, however, and I couldn't reach the line in time.

I left my second pair of shoes as I pushed off into the bunker oil and water as the ship nearly rolled on top of me. I swam away as far and as fast as I could until I ran out of breath. I thought the *Oklahoma* might blow up or I might be sucked down with her.

I turned and watched the ship finish her roll of about 150°, which turned out to be uneventful. The ship was now nearly upside down, but things were happening so

fast that it was a matter of self-preservation and survival; I didn't have time for feelings. Those came later.

Shortly after I was in the water, our ships started returning fire with their antiaircraft guns. The Japanese aircraft had been flying over me at a fairly low level. When fire was returned, I noticed the aircraft almost immediately gained altitude to avoid our guns and remained at high altitude thereafter.

When I looked around, I saw that several men in the water nearby were having difficulties. You must remember that in those days one need not know how to swim to be in the Navy. I also noted bumps about the size of a football floating high, covered with oil. Upon examination, I found these to be chunks of cork, probably from a life raft. I pushed these over to the men and told them to hold them under their chins until they could be rescued, being careful not to be grabbed by them and pulled under. This action was successful.

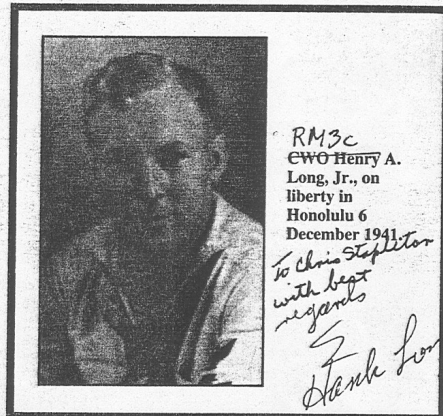
Then I heard loud yells and screams for help, only to discover that these cries were coming from several men clinging to the overturned main float of one of our OS2U's (scout/observation planes) that flopped upside down in the water when the *Oklahoma* capsized. I was extremely angry with them because they appeared unhurt and safe compared with the men around them. I gave them hell and they piped down.

I tried to swim around the stern of the *Oklahoma* with the intention of boarding the battleship *Tennessee* (BB-43), which was immediately behind the *Maryland* and in-board of the battleship *West Virginia* (BB-48), whose port side had been blown out by aerial torpedoes. I discovered I wasn't making much headway and stopped to check for drift; I found I was swimming against the current.

I turned, intending to swim around the bow of the overturned *Oklahoma* to go ashore on Ford Island. As I got near the bow, I could see an officer's motorboat coming toward me from the island. As it got closer I could see that the officer in the boat was Ensign Davenport, the one who would not let us out onto the main deck aft. He shouted at me to stand by to be picked up. I declined because I was a strong swimmer and felt in no danger. I thought they should continue out and pick up those who were less fortunate than I. Also, I did not want to get in the same boat with this man. I had strong feelings against him (and still do); I felt he was directly responsible for most of the more than 400 men lost from the *Oklahoma*.

The coxswain overran me with the motorboat when Ensign Davenport insisted, over my objections, on my being picked up. I got a big scare when the boat was backed down and nearly ran over me. I had to grab and hang onto the transom to keep my feet and legs from being caught in the propeller. I was pulled aboard, covered with oil. Ensign Davenport was immaculate.

We picked up two or three more survivors. One of these had a bad thigh injury on his right leg. One of the men helped me take the injured man down into the forward compartment where we tried to bandage the wound with a kapok life preserver. Shortly after this Ensign Davenport announced that "We had done enough for the day." He ordered the coxswain to return to a small fuel pier near



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

the bow of the *Maryland*. After we tied up, he secured the boat; crew and all went ashore, taking the injured man with them.

I didn't feel our job was done and started looking around to see how I could help further. I went into a small boat shed that adjoined the pier and found a very young sailor on his hands and knees heaving into the water. I examined him and found he was clean and uninjured. He was literally "scared sick." I discovered stacks of Navy mattresses stored in the overhead of the shed. I put the young sailor to work pulling down the mattresses and taking them over to the nearby naval air station dispensary, where I thought they would be needed. He was all right after he had something to do.

It turned out that this boat shed was where the naval air station kept its small boats in the water. The shed was constructed of galvanized corrugated iron over a wood frame. I briefly thought about slivers or worse if that building got a hit.

On the far end of the shed I saw a chief trying to start a beautiful mahogany runabout without success. I asked him if I could help him get it started. He said, "Fine. If you can get it started, get it out of here." He was afraid the boats would be consumed in the fire from the oil and aviation gasoline on the water that was spreading our way.

I had no difficulty getting the small 16-foot Dodge "Waltercar" started. I took it out and made many trips rescuing survivors from the water and bringing them back to the fuel pier, where about a dozen small boats were tied up along the shore between the *Maryland* and Ford Island. I would ask them on the way in if they knew how to operate a motor launch or motor whaleboat. If they said they knew how, I sent them to man the boats and continue the rescue.

By this time, of course, the beautiful runabout was a mess from pulling oil-soaked men into the boat. The windshield and foredeck were covered with oil from the spray. I was such a mess that I discarded my shorts and skivvy



Torpedo tracks can be seen streaking toward the *Oklahoma* (arrow) just minutes after the attack began. She is already beginning to list to port, as is the *West Virginia*, just astern of her. The *Nevada* is in the lower left corner.

T-shirt, my uniform of the day. I continued rescue operations bare assed but still black with oil.

I got a big thrill when the battleship *Nevada* (BB-36) got under way, but my heart sank when she stopped in the middle of the channel after being heavily attacked by Japanese aircraft. It looked like she took a bomb or bombs—and possibly a torpedo—on the forward part of the ship. I thought I heard the order “abandon ship” on the *Nevada*’s general announcing system. I ran over there with the runabout and could see men jumping into the water from the forward deck. I made several trips carrying them to the pier at Ford Island.

My wristwatch was not waterproof and had stopped soon after I hit the water. (I still have it by the way.) I estimate it was around 10:00 or 10:30 in the morning when I started to run out of gas with the runabout. I noticed a Navy lieutenant standing near the shore at Ford Island ahead of the battleship *California* (BB-44). I nosed the bow of the runabout up on the beach and got out and asked if he knew where I could get some gasoline. He told me all they had was aviation gas, and it wouldn’t run in my boat. He made no mention of the fact that I was standing before him completely naked and black with oil. I could see badly damaged hangars and many destroyed planes behind him. Some might have been serviceable, but the fabric control surfaces were in shreds.

Being fair-complected, I thought I might get a severe sunburn, so I stole a chambray shirt from a clothesline nearby, which was my uniform for the rest of the day.

I didn’t know at the time that the Kermath engine in the runabout had been modified to run on aviation gasoline. Still, I found I could run at idle speed because the gas line in the tank was on the forward end. If I ran slowly and kept the bow down, I still had some gas to run on.

I idled out to West Loch, a naval ammunition depot. On the way, I came upon a huge sea turtle with lots of barnacles on its shell. It was craning its neck and looking around. Apparently, its world had been upset too. I idled over to get a better look, but it dove at my approach.

When I arrived at West Loch the ammunition ship *Pyro* (AE-1) was at the pier. I recognized the executive officer who was on the flying bridge, Lieutenant Commander William Martin. I had sailed on board the *Pyro* from Bremerton to San Diego before being assigned to the *Oklahoma*. Since I was the first to arrive from Pearl Harbor, he asked me what had happened. I told him that most of the battleships had been sunk. He told me that I was a “damned liar” and that he could see their masts. I said “That may be. But they are on the bottom.” I tied the runabout to a small pier nearby.

The ammunition depot appeared to be operated by the Marines, who took me in and cleaned me off with paint thinner, which smarted, to say the least. I then enjoyed a shower, and they gave me clothing. From the skin out, I was dressed in khakis as a Marine. I guess by that time it was late in the afternoon.

I decided there was nothing more I could do with the

runabout. The Marines had a small motor launch and crew which I joined. They gave me soap, towels, a toothbrush, toothpaste, clean skivvies, and socks. They even offered me money, but I refused, because I had nowhere to spend it. I slept in the boat with the crew. They were a great bunch of guys. I'll never forget their kindness.

About dark, the night of 7 December, several aircraft came into Pearl apparently intending to land at the naval air station on Ford Island. All hell broke loose. It seemed that everyone was firing at them. The tracers were quite a sight. It looked like one plane crashed on Ford Island and another in a cane field, which set the field on fire. It turned out that these aircraft were from the carrier *Enterprise*.

There were six men assigned to the *Oklahoma's* radio 4 as their battle station. They were Radioman Third Class Merton Smith, Seaman First Class Ray Cymerman, Seaman First Class Thomas Hannon, Seaman First Class Norman Roberts, Seaman First Class Harold Roiland, and Seaman First Class George Thatcher. The day after the raid, workmen passing by the sunken ship in a boat heard pounding from inside the *Oklahoma's* hull and cut a hole in the overturned bottom and rescued them. They nearly drowned before they could get out, as the hole cut by the workmen relieved the air pressure in the compartment and the watertight door wasn't completely watertight. We lost 30 men in radio central and radio 3.

I am not sure now whether it was the second or third night after the raid, but someone decided that the destroyers should be needing depth charges. Our motor launch was loaded to the gunwales with depth charges and boxes of detonators. It was nearly dark before we got under way. We were instructed to go around to all the destroyers in the harbor and ask them if they wanted depth charges.

Our depth charge expedition would not have been dangerous under ordinary circumstances, but everybody was nervous, and there were wild rumors that Japanese parachutists had landed on the island. Each ship we approached in the dark had armed sentries posted. We were challenged and weren't allowed to approach too closely until we could satisfy those on board that we were

friends and not foe. One shot could have blown us right out of the water.

When the ships found out the depth charges were free, they were glad to accept them, and we were exceedingly glad to get rid of them. The crews on the destroyers would swing out a small davit and hoist the charges out of our boat, and we would give them the detonators. Our expedition went on all that night and into the next day. When it got light enough to see, I noticed that some of the destroyers had the paint burned off their stacks from hard-running searches for the enemy after the raid. This is the only time I have ever seen this.

I discovered the radiomen on the *Pyro* were short-handed, so I helped out in the radio shack. On one of my brief time-off periods, I saw parts of a wooden crate on the deck with pieces of a large armor-piercing projectile in it. I examined the projectile quite carefully. There were several U.S. ordnance markings stamped in the metal along with Japanese ordnance markings. The projectile probably had been manufactured in the United States during World War I for the British. It looked to be the wrong caliber (too large) for our guns, and had been sold to the Japanese after the war, probably in the 1930s as scrap. They reworked or modified the projectile into an aerial bomb and placed their own ordnance stamps on it. I believe it had been dropped onto one of the forward turrets of the *Tennessee*, but it failed to penetrate or explode, and broke into a few pieces on impact. I was told it was being shipped back to the States for study.

A few days after my arrival at West Loch, a motor launch and crew came from the Naval Air Station, Ford Island, looking for their Dodge runabout. They found it and towed it away. I had tried to clean it up to some extent but didn't have much time to work on it. I never did get gasoline for it. I hated to see it go. Without it many more lives might have been lost. The little boat deserved a Navy "Well done!"

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Those of us who were left behind down in the powder handling room during those final seconds when the ship capsized were not aware at first that she was turning turtle. The darkness there was wild and confusing with objects of all descriptions being tumbled and thrown about. As we frantically fought to save ourselves, we became disoriented. It all happened so quickly that we could hardly grasp what was going on.

I felt the ship lurch. The deck slipped out from under me and my hands snatched at empty air. I was tossed and spun around, pitched into a great nothingness, suspended in air as the ship turned about me. It was as if we were in a suspended state of animation for the few seconds that all of us—the living, dying, and the dead—were whirled around together, bodies pointing in all directions.

Quickly the water flooded in. We were buffeted about, twisted and turned by its strength.

Then the dark waters closed over me as the ship came to rest—upside down on the bottom of the harbor.

I surfaced, gulped for air, and automatically began to swim, or more exactly to tread water, in the confining space of the handling room. I was surprised to find myself alive.

Excerpted from *Trapped at Pearl Harbor: Escape from Battleship Oklahoma* by Stephen Bower Young (Naval Institute Press/North River Press, 1991).